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NEWS

Winchester residents join growing ICE protests in Burlington

AAYUSHI DATTA | CORRESPONDENT

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Protesters march along District Avenue holding a large banner reading 'End the ICE Age' during the weekly protests outside the Burlington ICE facility. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/AAYUSHI DATTA

Hundreds of people holding signs gather every Wednesday outsi
Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in Burlington. Af

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them are Winchester residents who say their presence is driven by concern, compassion and a sense of responsibility.

What began in April as a small demonstration organized by the group Bearing Witness @ ICE has grown into weekly demonstrations that draw as many as 600 to 700 people – a response to the Trump administration's immigration raids in communities across the country.

Rebecca Slisz, executive director of the Network for Social Justice in Winchester, took her first trip to the ICE facility in the summer. Slisz has attended several protests since, often bringing high school interns or volunteers.

The events are filled with speakers, songs and a short march down District Avenue. People hold signs with slogans such as "Keep Families Together," "Dignity Not Deportation" and "Love the Immigrant as Yourself." Some attendees come in costume, including one dressed as an eagle.

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A participant stands with her dog near the Burlington ICE facility on Wednesday, holding a sign that reads, 'I come from immigrants — and so do you,' as crowds gather for the weekly demonstration. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/AAYUSHI DATTA

"It's always been peaceful when I've been there," Slisz said. "I hav
witnessed anything but people holding signs, people singing, pe

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speaking."

Winchester faith communities have also quietly shown up. While they don't carry banners identifying their congregations, Slisz said "there are individuals from several Winchester congregations who attend regularly."

Philip Coonley, a retired U.S. Department of Transportation employee and Winchester resident, said his involvement began seven years ago when his church provided round-the-clock sanctuary to a Honduran woman facing deportation and separation from her two U.S.-born children.

"We wanted to follow up our values with not only taking care of this woman in sanctuary, but also by letting the world know that not everybody was happy with the immigration policy that was then being enforced," Coonley said.

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He said his environmental group, 350 Mass, decided this year to attend in solidarity, connecting climate change to global migration pressures. That brought him back to Burlington after several years away.

"When you go there, you're reminded that there are a lot of decent people of all sorts of faiths and ages and all that share a common sense of responsibility to do better by our immigrants," Coonley said.

While attending the demonstration, Slisz noticed something else.

"The group skews older and appears white," she said. "And the reason is very real — many people of color don't feel safe attending a protest at all."

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Some younger participants of color, including students Slisz brou
unsafe showing their faces.

"They pulled up their hoods and wore masks. When a helicopter went overhead, they didn't want to be seen," she said. "That says something about how unsafe many people still feel."

Protestors at the ICE facility in Burlington. Check out a photo essay from the event here. COURTESY PHOTOS/KRISTIN CHALMERS CREATIVE

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Rosalyn Nazarro, a 75-year-old naturalized citizen who immigrated from the United Kingdom, has been attending the protest regularly since it started this spring.

“What is remarkable is responsive people driving past and walking past,” Nazarro said. “We get practically unanimous support and people beeping their cars.”

Nazarro, who attends The Parish of the Epiphany church in Winchester, said members of the church try to attend the gathering every second Wednesday of the month. Some attend more often.

“My motivation is that this is a country made up of immigrants, and especially now, the treatment is so cruel and divisive and inhumane, and I just feel that I need to be there,” Nazarro said.

She said she wishes more Winchester residents would show up.

Slisz said Winchester could do more to protect its residents.

“Our town adopted a Human Rights Statement in 2009 and updated it in 2020,” she said. “It says Winchester will protect people regardless of race, identity, or immigration status. We need to live up to that.”

Aayushi Datta is a journalism student at Boston University. This story is part of a partnership between Winchester News and the Boston University Department of Journalism.

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